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ABSTRACT

A career development course designed to meet the diverse needs and time considerations of returning adult college students is presented. The first of two sections provides an overview of the unique character of these nontraditional students, including their greater experience and maturity, multiple role demands, and increased commitment to career goals. Section 2 outlines the course's eight 2-hour sessions. For each session, skill and content objectives are listed. Emphasis throughout is on integration of external factors such as stress management and age discrimination with internal factors such as self-confidence and role conflicts. Six recommended assignments are also listed. Concluding recommendations focus on meeting individualized needs and fostering group support within the class. (LP)

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RETREADS & REENTRY:

A UNIQUE CAREER COURSE FOR OLDER ADULTS

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RETREADS & REENTRY:

A UNIQUE CAREER COURSE FOR OLDER ADULTS

Many articles have recently been published indicating the increased number of older adults returning to colleges and universities. Based on predictions, this trend is expected to continue (Bolles 79). These students choose to attend college for a variety of reasons including upgrading skills, retraining for a new career or preparing to enter the work force. Some students take courses for personal enrichment without consideration of their career planning.

In addition to their role as "student" most returning adults have a variety of demands from other role responsibilities such as spouse, parent, worker, child, community member, etc. Although there has been much media attention to these multiple role conflicts, few educational systems have incorporated this into their future planning. Typically, institutions of higher education have been slow to respond to this group of students (Finnegan, Westefeld & Elmore, 1981), although some changes are being made. In recognizing this gap in student development, student service professionals are becoming more involved in direct classroom instruction (Stonewater, Daniels, 1983). Classroom instruction can be a vehicle to facilitate development in students and encourage growth beyond academic learning.

Course Development

The concept of modifying existing services rather than creating new ones for returning adults (Heppner & Olson, 1982) was used in designing ways to meet the diverse needs and time considerations of adults interested in their career planning. Therefore, it was decided to modify an existing academic

credit course in the Education Department to aid and encourage the career/personal development of returning students. Specific criteria along with perceived differences between traditional and non-traditional students provided the basis for redesigning an existing career development seminar. One consideration was that adults may face a variety of transitions and changes at the same time. Furthermore, many times when adults are experiencing these transitions, like returning to school or work, changing family structures, moving to another life stage or changing careers, their support systems may be inadequate (Waters & Goodman, 1981). Therefore, identifying existing support systems and developing new ones can be an important part of adults successfully implementing their goals. This concept was built into the design of the course by using small group discussion and limiting enrollment. Other criteria used in the redesign of the course followed guidelines for midlife career development groups suggested by Brown (1981). These include allowing for individual differences, integrating other life roles with work roles, and basing curriculum on established theory and empirical data.

In recognizing the uniqueness of returning students some assumptions were made regarding the differences between traditional (18-22 yrs.) and non-traditional (22 and up) students. These include increased experience and maturity; heightened level of career and societal awareness; multiple role demands and conflicts; varied developmental life stages; and greater commitment to academic/career goals. Although there are many more issues facing adults, these were selected for inclusion in the course curriculum and format because of the relevance to career choice.

Course Structure

The course is designed for adults, thirty and over who are returning to school, changing careers or entering the work force. There are eight sessions, two hours each which could easily be adapted to a full semester. The sessions are designed to teach career development in a systematic way yet integrate other life roles and give attention to the demands of adulthood.

Based on the assumed needs of returning students the goals for the course are:

- 1) To become aware of the career/life planning process
- 2) To become familiar with career development and adult development theory
- 3) Acquire necessary information and skills for implementing career decision-making
- 4) Develop an understanding of the variety of factors influencing career choice including change, transitions and conflicts
- 5) Integrate theory and research with life situations

This course combines information, personal development and self-help concepts. Activities, worksheets and class discussion are an integral part of the course design. When choosing activities the instructor should pay special attention to the appropriateness of the exercise for returning students. An awareness of how to integrate the lectures, activities, and group discussions is also imperative to the success of this supportive and experiential seminar.

The following outline includes objectives for each session:

SESSION I

- Introduction to class expectations, requirements
- Introduction to career/life planning process
- Career development theory
- Develop life-line worksheet

SESSION II

- Introduction to decision-making
- Stages of adult development
- Analysis of current life situation-roles and priorities
- Discussion on change, conflicts, and constraints

SESSION III

- Self-assessment and exploration
- Values (career, lifestyle and personal)
- Interests/needs
- Share future dreams and goals
- Time management: multiple role conflicts

SESSION IV

- Skill identification
- Write accomplishment and experience paragraphs
- Discuss concept of transferable, functional skills
- Complete self-profile summary sheet

SESSION V

- Developing personal power
- Environmental stresses: relationships w/family, community and society
- Stress management issues
- Discuss coping strategies
- Synthesis of external constraints

SESSION VI

- Occupational exploration and information gathering
- Job market trends
- Non-traditional career opportunities
- Introduce informational interviewing
- Role-play informational interviewing

SESSION VII

- Job search skills
- Resume and correspondence
- Interviewing techniques and age discrimination
- Strategies

SESSION VIII

- Career advancement/change
- Structure of organizations: Making the most of your job
- Dual-career issues
- Goal setting
- Project planning worksheet
- Review and summary

The course objectives that are especially important are the ones that are unique to the adult population. The integration of external factors (stress-management, age discrimination, and time issues) with internal factors (multiple role conflicts and lack of self-confidence) was particularly helpful to students. Furthermore, the consistent recognition of their unique life situations is necessary for acceptance and comprehensive self-exploration. Issues such as dual-career couples, child care or fear of change may be addressed with traditional age students, but these concerns take on a special personal meaning for the adult student. Combining the information and structure of standard career planning with the life experiences and development of these adults can be challenging and rewarding.

Several assignments are required because of the need for integration of a variety of concepts. Requirements for this course may be adapted depending on instructor preference and course design. Some suggested assignments include:

- 1) Integrative paper - Students are asked to prepare a self-exploration paper integrating their stage of adult development, stage of career planning and personal barriers or conflicts.
- 2) Job search project - This assignment could explore one of several topics depending on preference of individual students. Examples include writing a resume, cover letter, career information abstract or mock interview, conducting an informational interview.
- 3) Research paper - Students choose a topic relating to careers or the structure of work. Factual information and career development theory together with personal experiences, views and criticisms should be integrated in the paper.
- 4) A written journal of their personal experiences and self-exploration during the semester.
- 5) Class presentations on specific career topics
- 6) Mid-term exam and/or final

The most valuable assignments seemed to be the ones that integrated their life situations with their stages of career development. Allowing them to choose from a variety of topics was more individually beneficial than a group assignment. This again recognized their individual uniqueness but also normalized their feelings when shared with the group. Many of the students commented that being forced to think about and integrate their lives was particularly useful. It helped them get more clear about their own lives and see a connection to their every day situations.

Maintaining academic excellence requires certain planning and preparation. It is important to present relevant research and/or factual data to provide a foundation from which to discuss the concepts. There are many excellent career planning books that would be appropriate texts, however, few of these thoroughly address the complex issues of adulthood. Recommended or required readings from a variety of resources may be a better option than a single textbook.

Conclusions and Recommendations

A major focus for this course should be individualized goals, but with group support. In other words, the lectures, activities and assignments should be relevant to students depending on where they place themselves in the career development process. At the same time, group support, discussion and encouragement should be provided. The more personal relevance the course had for the students, the more they were willing to respond and support other students in their goals. The class atmosphere should be kept informal to allow for interpersonal interaction.

Recommendations were sought from students through course evaluation. The evaluations were very positive; citing course content, format and individual attention as the most helpful and length of course as the most problematic. Many students preferred that this course meet twice a week for one hour rather than two hours once a week. Also, student recommendations included having guest speakers and requiring all entering students to take the course. All students felt that they had a better understanding of career development and their responsibility in the process. They seemed eager to continue in their exploration and

implementation of objectives. The recognition of their individual and collective uniqueness as adult students played an important role in their satisfaction with the course. Finally, the students who completed the course felt it met a very important need in their career/life development and their academic goals. One student reacted, "It's the most significant course in my academic career. It's changed my life."

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